

End to Alberta's \$25/day child-care program creates 'double-blow' for families ^[1]

Loss of subsidy next month comes on top of worries parents may be feeling about child's health

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Access online ^[2]

Access Edmonton AM radio segment [9:26] ^[3]

EXCERPTS

Parents who rely on daycare for their children have had plenty to worry in recent months with regard to the physical and emotional health of their little ones.

Starting next month, the families of about 1,300 of those children will have something else to deal with: extra cost after a government program for \$25-a-day daycare comes to an end at the end of July.

"They're very uncertain at this time. It's a double blow actually for them," said Jasvinder Heran, executive director of the Intercultural Child and Family Centre, located in central Edmonton.

"One, you've got COVID, and second, fees are going to go higher than the \$546 that we were presently at," she said in a Thursday interview with CBC Radio's *Edmonton AM* ^[4]. "It is very, very stressful and it's unfortunate and it's quite emotional."

The Alberta government announced in January it would not renew the first phase of the \$25-a-day daycare pilot program, launched in 2017 with a planned end-date of March 2020, though the UCP did extend it to July 31.

The first phase affects 22 Alberta daycares, with about 1,300 spaces. The second phase of the program added almost 6,000 subsidized spaces to another 100 centres. Funding for those centres will continue into 2021.

Lindsay Campbell, director of the Building Blocks daycare in Grande Prairie, is among the second wave. Parents at her centre are carefully watching what happens next and are being urged to prepare for their own fees to increase next April, she said.

But there has been an unexpected silver lining to the pandemic in that there is a growing recognition of the importance of daycare in supporting the Alberta workforce.

"Our economy learned very quickly that they couldn't operate without us," Campbell told *Edmonton AM*. "Within a week of being closures, there was the realization of what an essential service child care was."

"I feel that the government knew that that was very important to help rebuild our economy, because families couldn't go back to work unless they had care."

Most daycares in the province were shut down in mid-March, although a limited number — including the centres run by Heran and Campbell — remained open to care for children of essential workers, including health-care staff.

All daycares were given the green light to reopen in mid-May as long as they met a number of health-related provisions such as smaller groups of children, physical distancing measures, masks and increased cleaning.

Providing clear explanations of the changes to parents and the children — including many families for whom English is a second language — has been important, according to Campbell and Heran.

"It is very hard to social distance kids. They're social creatures, they want to be around each other. So we have to be very smart on how we're doing this in a way to not affect their mental health — because I think that's another crisis that's happened through all of this," Campbell said.

On Thursday, the Alberta Opposition NDP said a universal affordable child-care program should be implemented at all non-profit daycares, private centres and family day homes.

The news release on its proposed child-care recovery plan also urged the Alberta government to provide a \$2-per-hour wage top-up for early childhood educators.

A spokesperson for Children's Services told CBC that the government will be "working with some of the centres serving lower income families to ensure families don't experience hardship."

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